

Selling More Than the Bull

Taking a program approach, these Western seedstock producers have stepped up efforts to meet the demands of their commercial customers.

BY ANDRA CAMPBELL

Seedstock producers have a vested interest in the success of their clientele. The following three producers have focused on customer communication, listening to their customers' needs and responding by developing programs to assist their commercial buyers. In doing so, they're marketing more than bulls — they're marketing their entire programs.

■ THOMAS ANGUS RANCH

Located near Baker City, Ore., Thomas Angus Ranch is surrounded by 60,000 head of mother cows. Just two hours west of Boise, Idaho, the ranch location is a prime spot to be in the cattle business. "We can't grow much except for cattle here," says Rob Thomas. "In our location we have to rely on the commercial cow-calf producer."

Though Thomas Angus Ranch has developed a good female market, Bob and Gloria Thomas and Rob and Lori Thomas realized long ago they had to make their money selling bulls. With 600 registered Angus cows, and the start of an embryo transfer (ET) program that will give them 150 additional calves each year, they have "a few" bulls to market.

"Our program is 100% AI (artificial insemination)," says Rob, who relies heavily on proven bulls in his AI program and proven cows and bulls in his ET program.

On the third Thursday of October, Thomas Angus Ranch hosts the Branded Performance Production Sale, in which it markets 200 bulls — most of them weaned calves — and 100 bred cows and heifers. Later they will market an additional 100-150 bulls as yearlings.

In a development center on the ranch,

the bulls are fed a high-roughage ration to foster growth without getting the bulls too fat. Thomas Angus Ranch invites customers to an open house in January to view the bulls, providing participants breakfast and lunch. They weigh the bulls, collect ultrasound data, take yearling weights and semen test the bulls.

"This is a great opportunity for us to sit down with our customers and talk to them one-on-one," says Thomas.

Offering a bull-wintering program has benefited customers and the ranch. "Our wintering program started five years ago, with about 30% of our customers wintering their bulls," says Thomas. "Today between 80% and 85% winter their bulls with our program."

The program enables Thomas Angus Ranch to process the yearling data on the bulls, and it assures the commercial

producers of getting well-developed, semen-tested bulls delivered to their ranches.

"Most commercial operators in our area calve in the spring," says Thomas, "but some customers, like [those] in California, calve in the fall. We will keep those bulls for almost one year."

The family takes pride in tending to customer relations. "We try to make all the deliveries ourselves and make the customer contacts," says Thomas. "We want to make sure that our customers are happy with their purchases, and we follow up as much as we can. We stress to our customers that we want to know how our bulls are doing in their programs. When you work with people on a one-on-one basis, they are more likely to let you know how the cattle are really doing."

Thomas Angus Ranch is also trying to get as much data from their commercial customers as possible. "We get to see how our program is working by following the cattle through the feedlot," says Thomas. "By working close with the commercial operator, we have established this relationship, and they are willing to give us information back."

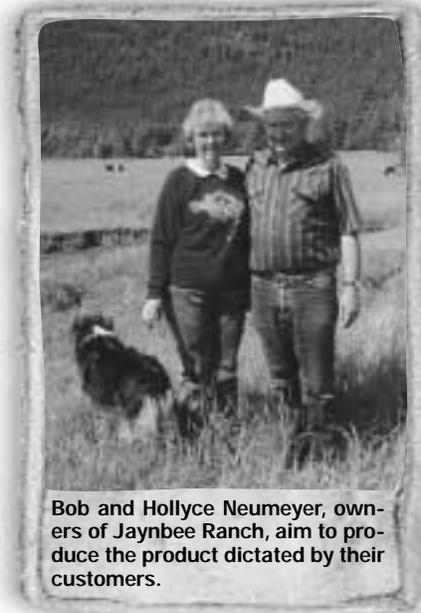
■ JAYNBEE RANCH

"Our customers want lots of performance, with low birth weights," says Bob Neumeyer, a past secretary of the Western States Angus Association and a member of the American Angus Association Board of Directors from 1979 to 1985. "They want bulls who are not overfat, bulls they can turn out in rough conditions." Neumeyer and his wife, Hollyce, owners of Jaynbee Ranch, Bonners Ferry, Idaho, are proud to offer what their customers demand.

In 1968 the Neumeyers moved to Idaho from Citrus Heights, Calif., to partner with Jerry and Bob McFarland, who had started Jaynbee Ranch in 1941. The Neumeyers bought out the partnership in 1975. Today they manage 275 registered Angus cows.

"We have tried to find as much performance in our cattle as we could and still keep low birth weights," says Neumeyer. Their program provides bulls and heifers for other registered Angus breeders, as well as bulls for commercial cow-calf operators.

Bonners Ferry, a small town located 10 miles from the Canadian border, is in a grain-producing valley — not the usual place to find many commercial operations. Deciding it was hard for the commercial operator to get to them, the Neumeyers thought they should go to the commercial operator. With more than 100 bulls to sell annually, they decided to send them to a backgrounding yard in Hermiston, Ore.,



Bob and Hollyce Neumeyer, owners of Jaynbee Ranch, aim to produce the product dictated by their customers.

and to hold their annual bull sale in Spokane, Wash.

This year Jaynbee Ranch also will sell females in their March sale. The sale, which started in the mid-'80s, then discontinued for a few years because they had orders from big ranches for their bulls, is now back to an annual schedule. They sell mostly yearling bulls, with 15-20 2-year-olds.

"This is what our market has dictated," says Neumeyer.

Aiming to please their customers, Jaynbee Ranch provides ultrasound information, semen tests, scrotal measurements and test data on all the bulls offered in the sale. "We also follow up with our customers in order to know what they are looking for. This is one of the most important aspects of our program," says Neumeyer. They also provide a progress report on the bulls to several hundred of their customers — and potential customers — 70 days into a 120-day test.

"Most of our buyers come from Washington, Oregon, Wyoming, Montana and southern Idaho," says Neumeyer. "That's one of the reasons we like to hold the sale in Spokane, as it's centrally located."

Realizing that soundness and frame size are two critical points with their customers, Jaynbee Ranch has focused a lot of its attention on these areas. "Our customers want 6½ to 7 frame scores and sound bulls. Maybe breeders in the Midwest can sell smaller bulls, but we can't," says Neumeyer.

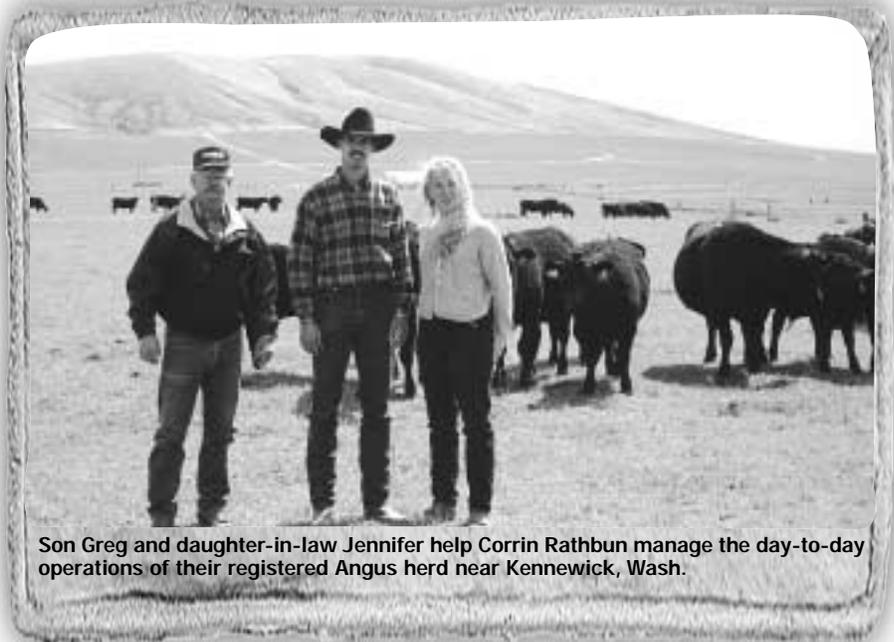
"We have also worked with commercial herds on getting back carcass data," says Neumeyer.

■ RATHBUN ANGUS

Corrin Rathbun and his family are relative newcomers to the Angus breed. Located near Kennewick, Wash., the Rathbuns started raising Angus cattle in 1989 with the purchase of some bred fall-calving cows from Lettunich & Sons of Payette, Idaho. "We had money left over from some custom haying ... and decided we wanted to purchase some Angus females," says Rathbun. Later they bought more females from Thomas Angus Ranch and began to build their herd to their present 265 head.

Having been raised with farming and milk cows, then commercial cattle, Rathbun knew he wanted Angus. An alfalfa hay farmer, Rathbun says that his son, Greg, and daughter-in-law, Jennifer, now have stepped up to help manage the day-to-day operations of the registered Angus cattle.

"When we began our program, we elected to have fall-calving cows," says Rathbun, explaining that the cows calve easier in the fall and that they want to sell 18-month-old bulls. "Most people calve in



Son Greg and daughter-in-law Jennifer help Corrin Rathbun manage the day-to-day operations of their registered Angus herd near Kennewick, Wash.

the spring," he says, "but I have seen too many calves born in minus-25-degree weather, and it's a real challenge to keep them alive." Because they live in a mild climate with an average annual rainfall of 7-9 inches (in.), the weather is ideal for September calvings.

The Rathbuns AI all of their cows one time, some twice, then turn out their cleanup bulls. Using moderate-framed herd sires, they aim for efficient bulls that won't be too big or too little for their customers. "I learned early on that you can cross the greatest cow with the greatest bull and end up with an average calf," says Rathbun, explaining their cautious but growing ET program.

The Rathbuns annually host their Superior Angus Genetics Sale at the ranch near Kennewick on the last Wednesday in February. They will sell 90 bulls, some bred heifers and cows, and more than 100 head of black commercial heifers purchased back from their bull customers.

"We offer the same amount for the pick of heifers that our buyers received for their steer calves," says Rathbun. They buy the heifers in the fall at weaning time and feed them in their development center along with their own calves. "We feed the heifers through the winter, vaccinate and worm them, and group them into lots of five to 10 heifers for the sale," he says.

"A few years ago we sent out a survey to all of our bull customers," says Rathbun. "We wanted to know what was important to them and how they prioritized different things." The results came back with birth weights being the No. 1 concern, followed

by weaning weights, "which told us that their bottom line would rule; the calf must be alive and perform to the maximum," says Rathbun. "It is why we have always tried to breed low-birth-weight, high-performance bulls."

For the past four years, Rathbun has asked Ken Conway of Angus GeneNet to visit with their customers about alliances. "We wanted them to be aware that this is where the industry might be headed," says Rathbun.

"We always try and talk with our customers so that we know what their needs are," he says. Something as simple as delivering your own bulls means a lot to the commercial cow-calf operator.

If they don't have what that person needs, Rathbun sends customers to another ranch. "There are a lot of good Angus breeders around here, and I am proud to send my customers to them."

By offering constant contact and a 100% guarantee, Rathbun Angus is proud of what they have accomplished in a few short years. "In our sale catalog we put red ink on all the positive carcass data," says Rathbun. "It's now getting pretty well inked up. I am told we are one of the few people who are doing this."

Seedstock producers can do much to assure commercial cow-calf operators success in adding value to their calves. It all starts with listening to customers' needs, then developing a program to satisfy those needs. Remember, you're marketing more than individual bulls; you're marketing a program.

